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New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 9th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KALPAGE (Sri Lanka)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 88: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/48/21 and A/48/407)

1. Mr. BROUHNS (Belgium), speaking on behalf of the European Community and its member States, said that General Assembly resolution 59 (I), one of the first resolutions that had been unanimously adopted by the General Assembly, in December 1946, declared that freedom of information was a fundamental human right and an essential factor in the promotion of peace and progress. Freedom of the press and respect for the work of journalists were indispensable for the exercise of that right. He strongly condemned attacks against members of the press and paid homage to the memory of all journalists who had died in the performance of their professional duties.

2. The European Community and its member States welcomed the maintenance of unanimous support for the strengthening of the free flow of information and on the reduction of disparities existing between developed and developing countries in the field of information. The Twelve were prepared to cooperate with the developing countries and to seek the means for assisting the Department of Public Information in carrying out its task.

3. As a major contributor to the Organization's budget, the European Community and its member States hoped that the considerable resources allocated to the Department, in particular for the production of certain publications, would be managed efficiently and rationally. The resources allocated for the dissemination of information on apartheid would have to be reviewed as soon as democratic elections were held in South Africa, and the impact of the Department's information campaigns should be rigorously assessed. The discussions already begun on that issue should be continued in the Fourth Committee.

4. The Department played an important role in the dissemination of information on peace-keeping activities, and the European Community and its member States commended the Department's day-to-day coverage of the major peace-keeping activities during the past year. The Department should adopt, within existing resources, a high-profile communication strategy to correct the distorted image that certain private media gave of United Nations activities, using for that purpose all modern means of information and communication and giving priority to direct contacts with journalists. Moreover, the "information" component should be an integral part of planning.

5. Certain United Nations information centres should be made regional and serve several countries. The integration of individual United Nations offices would help to increase productivity and achieve economies of scale.

6. While they were aware of the need for rigorous security measures, the Twelve considered that the recent suspension of guided tours had come at a particularly inopportune time. They hoped that the Department would be able to resume the tours in the near future, particularly in view of the forthcoming celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations.

7. Mr. JARAMILLO (Colombia), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77, said that the question of information, a key factor for political and economic power, was of great importance to the Group of 77, whose members fully supported freedom of opinion and freedom of the press, which were important for the strengthening of democracy and peace.

8. Because of their technological superiority, the developed countries held a virtual monopoly on information. The developing countries needed assistance to strengthen their communication capacities, which would enable them to ensure a more balanced exchange of information. The United Nations had a crucial role to play in that regard, and should endeavour to promote social responsibility on the part of the mass media.

9. The United Nations should widely disseminate its objectives and activities by all the means at its disposal. The Organization's renewed dynamism and its growing participation in the search for solutions to world problems since the end of the cold war had exposed it to severe criticism that went so far as to question its credibility. Through its activities, the Department of Public Information should improve the Organization's image in the eyes of the general public.

10. Programmes relating to information should be transparent and proportionate to the resources allocated to them. For the purpose of efficiency, the Group of 77 was prepared to hold a constructive debate on the evaluation of the Department's programmes. The reorganization of programmes in that area, like the reorganization currently in progress within the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) for the budget, should be carried out within the Committee on Information. In spite of the progress achieved in South Africa and the Middle East, the time had not yet come to discontinue the information programmes. The New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s also merited the Department's close attention.

11. The Group of 77 attached particular importance to United Nations publications and was surprised that the publication of Development Forum had been suspended without the involvement of the Committee on Information. He recalled the provisions of General Assembly resolution 47/73 B relating to publications and noted that publications could not be evaluated on the basis of commercial criteria, since the United Nations was not a profit-making organization. The press releases were an excellent way of publicizing the activities of the system. The Group of 77 was also concerned at the marginalization of questions relating to economic and social development in favour of questions relating to peace and security.

12. The information centres were an important means of disseminating information on United Nations activities, particularly in the developing countries. The process of integrating those centres with UNDP field offices in 18 countries had surprised many Member States. The Group of 77 feared that that integration policy might be harmful to the centres' public information activities in certain countries, and looked forward to the report that the Secretary-General would submit on the matter in accordance with the relevant draft resolution (A/48/21). It would be useful to have an explanation of the criteria for selecting the countries that would be affected by that process. The Group of 77 hoped that the information centres would retain their functional

(Mr. Jaramillo, Colombia)

and operational autonomy, and that efforts would be made to improve productivity, achieve economies of scale and project a unified image of the Organization.

13. The Group of 77 hoped that the decision to establish or reactivate information centres in the countries members of the Group of 77 would be implemented as soon as possible. The Group was surprised at the initiative to establish an information centre at Bonn, which had been put forward without giving the Committee on Information an opportunity to consider the question. The recommendations relating to information were contained in General Assembly resolutions, and any other step would constitute a violation of established rules.

14. With regard to the allocation of resources to the various centres, the Group of 77 reiterated the appeal, contained in paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 47/73 B, that the Secretary-General should study ways and means of redressing differences in that area. The Group of 77 hoped that the General Assembly would adopt the draft resolution in which the Assembly called upon the Secretary-General to rationalize the disbursement of available resources. It was important to continue to review the information costs borne by the Organization in each country, bearing in mind the resources at their disposal. The Group of 77 welcomed the contributions of certain States to the operation of those information centres.

15. With regard to the seven interim offices established in the republics of the former Soviet Union, the Fifth Committee had requested the Secretary-General to take into account the provisions of the relevant General Assembly resolutions.

16. The Group of 77 opposed the assignment of political functions to the resident coordinators. The United Nations was not a State; therefore, the coordinators could not assume the functions of political ambassadors.

17. As for the financing of the offices mentioned, the Group of 77 believed that it was for intergovernmental bodies to take a decision on the matter during the current session. In its view, the measures adopted should not be to the detriment of developing countries.

18. With regard to the extended bureau of the Committee on Information, the Group believed that it had an organizational function only. All substantive and programme decisions were the responsibility of the Fourth Committee, while financial questions were the responsibility of the Fifth Committee.

19. The Group of 77 commended UNESCO for its efforts, through its International Programme for the Development of Communications, to meet the growing needs of the developing countries in that field. It also welcomed cooperation between the Department of Public Information and UNESCO, particularly concerning the holding of regional seminars on independence of the press.

20. In conclusion, the Group of 77 was concerned by the delay in the implementation of certain General Assembly decisions and hoped that the Department would implement them as soon as possible.

21. Mr. RODRIGO (Sri Lanka) said that currently, what the United Nations was or was not doing in respect of controversial and fast-breaking developments throughout the world was attracting more media attention than ever, and its image, whether it evoked admiration of disdain, varied considerably according to the situation, as could be seen by consulting the newspapers in New York, Sri Lanka or anywhere else in the world. The important point was that there was no longer a sense of apathy about the United Nations.

22. The United Nations was in transition. Its action or inaction affected the lives of millions of people and the way in which it was perceived among the general public currently had a notable influence on the attitudes of Governments. Indeed, public opinion and government policy interacted, and the media were a point of linkage which, for better or for worse, had a powerful effect on both. The media had a direct and immediate impact on public reaction to United Nations actions. On the other hand, the message of the United Nations information system tended to move indirectly, and much more gradually.

23. Dissemination of accurate information, given the vast audience and the complexity of the issues at stake, was an enormous task, which the United Nations information system, if it relied on its own resources, would have difficulty in performing. It had no choice other than to work in close cooperation with the media, whether commercial, private or State. Good working relationships were vital, and they should be developed and maintained in such a way that the message could be understood and spread by other systems with a wider reach.

24. For the media, the United Nations was a fruitful source of material. Reports of its activities already reached a wider public than would otherwise have been possible for the Department of Public Information alone, for example. The challenge was to ensure that the coverage was informed, complete and fair and that it encouraged public faith in the United Nations. Any distortions or biased reporting would seem to reflect not only irresponsibility on the part of the media, but also the inability of the United Nations information system to work effectively with them. The media did not necessarily follow Government criteria; they were governed by a mixture of professional ethics and commercial compulsions. They sought to shape information to be attractive to the public, advertisers, shareholders, and so on. Therefore, the Committee should assess whether the United Nations information system as it currently functioned had taken full advantage of the spotlight now aimed at it, though that was not an easy task. A balanced image of the United Nations in all its complexity must be projected, and the United Nations system, for its part, might need to make an effort to meet the demands of the media.

25. United Nations Headquarters in New York was unique in housing one of the largest concentrations of media representatives in the world in a single building. But some of those representatives believed that United Nations information activities represented only "information of bureaucrats by bureaucrats for bureaucrats". It was thus evident that the approach of the Department of Public Information to the media was in great need of revamping. Ongoing exchanges and dialogue between the Organization and the media would be needed in order to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with reciprocal concessions and a periodic review of problems. His delegation, therefore, welcomed the suggestion to establish a small task force to look into all aspects

(Mr. Rodrigo, Sri Lanka)

of the relationship between the Department and media representatives accredited to the United Nations.

26. United Nations information centres must be promoted, giving priority to developing countries which had less well-developed information sources, particularly in the regions where the United Nations was conducting peace-keeping operations and other controversial programmes that required popular support as well as that of the host Government. The effectiveness of individual information centres must be analysed in cooperation with host Governments, taking into account in each case the particular range and scope of United Nations cooperation and involvement in the country concerned.

27. In conclusion, he supported the observations of the representative of Colombia, who had spoken on behalf of the Group of 77.

28. Mr. ZAIN (Malaysia) said that, in a world where peace, democratization and development were closely linked, and where political, security and development issues represented an increasingly important task for the United Nations, accurate and fair information was essential. Malaysia deplored the fact that, in many cases - for example the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gulf war, the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina and United Nations peace-keeping operations - the Western media had tended to disseminate biased and irresponsible information, which imposed their own perceptions and misled the public. In the current age of new information technology, the general public should be able to count on information that portrayed the reality of various situations in a manner that encouraged understanding among the peoples of the world.

29. The changed situation which had emerged at the end of the cold war had given rise to new expectations, and the United Nations and its information system were faced with new challenges and expanded activities. The Department of Public Information had an important, if not critical, role to play within the Organization. Therefore, it must be strengthened.

30. There was an information revolution brewing, where the power of the media had taken on a force of its own in forming political realities and moulding public opinion. His delegation fully supported the efforts of the Committee on Information and other United Nations agencies entrusted with establishing a more just and effective world information and communication order. It would be advisable to bear in mind at all times the guiding principles of the Charter and to avoid leaving the responsibility for information in the hands of a small group, for otherwise, public trust might wane and with it the moral authority of the Charter. On the question of peace-keeping, his delegation hoped that the Department of Public Information would liaise closely with the Department of Peace-keeping Operations to ensure that all basic information pertaining to safety, well-being and organizational tasks were properly presented. Malaysia had endeavoured to play a role in those operations and had sent contingents to many different parts of the world. His delegation was aware of the dangers and risks to which peace-keeping forces were exposed and considered that countries contributing troops should be informed of all aspects of the various situations in a timely, well-defined and balanced way.

(Mr. Zain, Malaysia)

31. His delegation furthermore considered it necessary to seize the exceptional opportunity of the forthcoming fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations in 1995 to promote the Organization's many accomplishments and to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. It fully supported the observations and recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Information, and appreciated the recent contribution made by UNESCO.

32. Mr. OMER (Sudan) endorsed the statement made by the representative of Colombia on behalf of the Group of 77. It was necessary to implement the recommendations of the Committee on Information, which were essential for the creation of an impartial press, particularly with respect to developing countries. United Nations information centres played a very important role, particularly in the light of the many changes which had recently taken place at the international, regional and national levels. The rapid transmission of objective and reliable information, particularly in developing countries, had become one of the pillars of the new world information order, and it was necessary to promote justice in that sphere and to counter the influence of the developed countries.

33. It was of particular importance that the Department of Public Information should cover all activities relating to racial discrimination and the question of Palestine.

34. While the Secretary-General's report on questions relating to information (A/48/407) listed the numerous activities of the Department of Public Information, it did not analyse them and did not specify to what extent they had been successful or how they could be improved. It would be advisable to strengthen cooperation with the competent agencies in Africa and to grant them assistance. Radio was extremely important in Africa, as it was the most important form of contact that people had with the outside world. As a matter of urgency, the Department of Public Information should organize seminars and training courses in Africa, as it had done in other parts of the world. While it was true that the Department of Public Information and the competent United Nations agencies were doing a great deal in the fields of social development and the environment, it was important for the general public in developing countries to be better informed about those questions, for otherwise there could be no real development in those countries.

35. His delegation awaited with interest the report that the Secretary-General would present to the Committee on Information at its sixteenth session, dealing with ways to remedy the disparities, particularly in the area of support, in the allocation of resources to United Nations information centres. That report would be all the more relevant in the light of what the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information had said the previous day concerning the establishment of new centres, for example at Sana'a and the enhancement of the centres at Tehran, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka and Bujumbura.

36. His country, like the other developing countries, was the victim of biased information, for it lacked the modern information facilities and the experience which would enable it to face up to the large information networks which disseminated distorted information for political purposes, even if only by correcting such information vis-à-vis the public. Those information networks

(Mr. Omer, Sudan)

were alarmist and prone to exaggeration, saying that, for example, vaccination was ineffective only in Africa or that the regime in a given country was expansionist or totalitarian as long as it did not seek to emulate the Western model of democratization.

37. Information had become a commercial activity, a very powerful political tool which could be used to shape public opinion. The professional ethics necessary in such a field were lacking, and it was to be feared that certain press agencies were currently in the hands of very powerful secret services.

38. His country was being continually subjected to an iniquitous information campaign, because it persisted in seeking to take freely political, cultural and social decisions that were consistent with the interests of its community. The world media spread totally unfounded information, describing the Sudan as a country divided into a Muslim Arab north and an African Christian south, with conflict between the two being at the heart of the crisis in the south. Another example of such information was blaming the State if assistance did not reach the populations of the south for whom it was destined. Those same media had not mentioned the criminal acts perpetrated against the peoples of the south by the rebels, who were violating human rights, shooting down civilian aircraft, stealing from cattle-breeders whose children were abducted and recruited by force, or killing United Nations workers.

39. The Sudan therefore hoped that the United Nations would play a pioneering role in the field of information and would become a forum where credibility and equality reigned, without the disparities which characterized current flows of information. The United Nations should obtain its information from the source and then disseminate it widely and promptly. It was inadmissible that a charity organization should publish information on a humanitarian situation, for example on flows of refugees or aid activities, before the competent agencies of the United Nations. United Nations personnel were impartial and well-intentioned, but that was not true of all those who worked for non-governmental organizations; some of the individuals concerned were in thrall to the false information circulating in the same groups that had sent them to the Sudan.

40. It was important that the Department of Public Information should explain more clearly the goals of the Organization, which was working for the benefit of Member States in regard to the settlement of conflicts and the maintenance of international peace and security. The United Nations information centres should be able to compete with the large international media operations.

41. His country was convinced of the importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. It was, however, necessary to show responsibility in exercising those rights, and not to incite social upheaval, particularly in developing countries, which were easily influenced. It was therefore essential, in the interests of the peoples concerned, to bring under control the revolutionary technique of transmitting televised broadcasts by satellite. The Sudan had recently adopted a law relating to the press. A press council had been created to ensure that journalists respected professional ethics. In fact it was the responsibility of the State to protect society, a responsibility it should not evade on the pretext of respecting freedom of expression or individual freedom.

REQUESTS FOR HEARINGS

42. The CHAIRMAN informed the Committee that he had received two communications containing requests for hearings pertaining to agenda item 38, "Elimination of apartheid and establishment of a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa". In accordance with the usual practice, he suggested that those communications should be circulated as documents of the Committee and examined at a later session.

43. It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4.25 p.m.